Evelyn Emma

Dr. Williamson

ENGL 864

June 9, 2014

Response 4

Religious and Aesthetic Division in Creativity in *Corinne, or Italy*

Corinne’s religious manifesto on page 179 of the text is another representation of the plenitude of the “vast tableaux.” Just as her philosophy of abundance and inclusion inform her improvisational performances, her dance, conversation, and other forms of creativity she engages in, it also informs her thoughts on religious observation and practice. Earlier in the novel, Corinne admires the abundance of the foliage of the Italian countryside that does nothing but beautify. This particular foliage is of no “use” to humans. Land that could foster some type of “useful” agriculture is not farmed, rather, nature “lovingly covers…with useless flowers, with useless plants which trail along the ground…” (78). This plant life serves no other purpose than beauty; there is no utility or function that they perform other than elevating and feeding the souls of the random passersby.

Corinne exhibits this same type of admiration for the pageantry of the various rituals of the Roman Catholic services. She says, “I love the glittering homage rendered by men to what promises them neither fortune nor power, to what punishes or rewards them only through a feeling in the heart…Oh, how I love what is useless, useless if life is only painful labour for a miserable profit….what is there better to do than to lift up our souls so that they may sense the infinite, the invisible, and the eternal…” (179). To Corrine, “lifting up the soul,” even momentarily, is a worthy achievement. In this manner, going through the rituals, even if one does not have an orthodoxy, or even orthopraxy, is creative because it creates an emotion which feeds the individual spirit and can also join humankind in a collective connectedness. Clearly, Corinne views the religious world and the natural world as related, each informing the other, both resulting in a feeding of the imagination.

Nelvil’s response, though in some ways revealing his limited scope, does raise one or two interesting questions. The first one centers around the momentary nature of the feelings Corinne views as ends in themselves. Nelvil gives the example of the preacher in the mountains who “was amazed at the inflexibility, at the harshness, of a man who lives only for one day towards a man who also only lives for one day” (181). Nelvil is challenging, not the elevated feeling that Corinne pursues, but its fleeting nature. If the effect does not last, if the “elevated soul” is only elevated briefly, if there is no cumulative effect, is it truly enlivening the imagination? Is creativity transformational if that implies a lasting effect? And if we call creativity possibly transformational, is it no longer in the realm of plenitude? Does it mean that we have necessarily crossed into scarcity?

Further, ironically, the preacher Nelvil references does not use the rote prayers and rituals associated with Corinne’s momentary elevation of the imagination; rather he is probably improvising to a greater or lesser degree, tapping into the same creative fount Corinne was so acclaimed for. If the rote manner of the priests is enough to cause elevation of the soul or a stirring of the imagination just by being beautiful, would not a deeply felt improvisational devotional also serve to elevate the soul? This idea supports Nelvil’s contention that “austerity” can also elevate the soul. Actually, it challenges the notion of austerity in Nelvil’s tradition because the improvisational method used borrows from the tradition of plenitude.

Finally, this religious gathering occurs not in the “lavishness of earthly riches” of a cathedral, but is situated in the arms of nature. Though Corinne praises the beauty for its own sake in the churches and cathedrals of Catholicism, nature is certainly celebrated, as discussed above and in many other places in the novel. The fact that Nelvil’s tradition can hold services in other than prescribed spaces (not only in nature, but the service on the boat is also described as moving) also indicates a plenitude perhaps not immediately visible, complicating the simple dichotomy as represented by the religion of Italy as opposed to the religion of England.

However, as the arc of the novel progresses, the aura of plenitude seems to diminish. Plenitude is still felt in the town of Naples and its inhabitants (or at least a carnival-like atmosphere—shades of Bahktin again), but as Corinne gets closer to creating her confessional, the imagery of Vesuvius begins to dominate. Like the monster in *Frankenstein*, the earth cannot contain itself, but explodes through what is holding it together. Vesuvius is also consuming; the fire which comes from it makes it so, and Nelvil hopes that the earth will “perhaps open up” and consume him (224). Both Nelvil and Corinne seem to have crossed over from the plenitude of creativity to the “ugliness” of creativity, of creativity as transgressive, not restorative.

Note: These scenes are reminiscent of the fact that the cold, rainy summer of 1816 in which Shelly conceived her novel was so cold and rainy because of the ash thrown up by Krakatowa which had erupted the year prior, and whose ash cast a pall over the entire earth for at least a full year afterward.